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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7566
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS IMMEDIATE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002503

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/27/2017

TAGS: PTER MOPS PINS RP

SUBJECT: PRESERVING PEACE PROCESS IN WAKE OF BEHEADINGS ON
BASILAN

REF: A. MANILA 2474
 1B. MANILA 2428
 1C. MANILA 2369
 1D. MANILA 2358
 1E. MANILA 2344

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Paul Jones
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. Ambassador, DCM and country team are urging Government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) leaders to preserve the peace process by exercising maximum restraint in the wake of the beheadings of ten Philippine marines on July 10. After many interventions, we understand President Arroyo has decided to delay further punitive military action until at least July 30, giving more time for a joint government-MILF investigation to proceed. We are coordinating our messages with like-minded Ambassadors from Australia, Canada, Japan, and New Zealand. We will continue to press the primacy of the peace process, and the use of cease-fire mechanisms to investigate and pursue perpetrators of the beheadings. Ultimately, the government may still decide to launch a military operation, which may or may not trigger wider violence. Meanwhile, Malaysian negotiators are in the Philippines trying to conclude a politically sensitive chapter in negotiations between the government and the MILF insurgents, adding another dimension to the current situation. End Summary

12. (C) Ambassador spoke with Executive Secretary Ermita and Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Esperon separately July 25 to urge maximum restraint and use of cease-fire mechanisms to investigate fully the beheadings on Basilan. Ermita and Esperon expressed the need for the Philippine military to take "limited police action" against the perpetrators. Ambassador urged them to consider carefully the effect that such action could have on peace and security, especially if MILF commanders initiated sympathy attacks. Ambassador and DCM also called Presidential Peace Process Advisor Dureza and Government Peace Panel Chairman Garcia as they prepared for an emergency National Security Council meeting. Both agreed with our messages, worrying that any military operation on Basilan could trigger a widening conflict. DCM also conveyed clearly to MILF Vice Chair Jafaar the responsibility of the MILF to help identify the perpetrators of the beheadings and not to allow MILF commanders to launch any "sympathy" attacks in Central Mindanao in the event of further fighting on Basilan.

13. (C) In a previously scheduled meeting, former Government

Peace Panel Chairman Afable described to DCM the pressure Malaysian officials were bringing to bear, both to keep the peace and make progress on the negotiating track. The Malaysian Chief of Staff had met earlier on July 25 with Philippine Chief of Staff Esperon, while the chief Malaysian facilitator was traveling to Mindanao for meetings with the MILF. Afable believed that peace talks could resume in Kuala Lumpur in the first half of August, if not derailed by renewed fighting.

¶4. (C) During Ambassador's July 26 breakfast with Australian, Canadian, Japanese, and New Zealand Ambassadors, there was a consensus on the need for concerted diplomatic engagement to uphold the primacy of the peace process. All parties agreed to coordinate carefully messages to government and MILF leaders urging maximum restraint and a thorough investigation of the July 10 beheadings.

¶5. (C) The Joint Committee for the Cessation of Hostilities will formally begin its fact-finding mission in Basilan on July 27, although both government and MILF representatives have completed preliminary investigations. We understand the President has decided to further delay punitive actions against alleged perpetrators of the beheadings until at least July 30 to allow time for the Joint Committee's investigation to proceed.

¶6. (C) Comment: The government may eventually decide to launch a limited punitive raid against perpetrators of the beheadings, while trying to minimize risk to the overall peace process. While the results are unpredictable, our message has clearly been heard. We will continue to make the case for restraint and use of peace process mechanisms for a full investigation. We discussed with like-minded

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Ambassadors using side meetings during the upcoming ASEAN Regional Forum to highlight the importance of the peace process in Mindanao.

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